

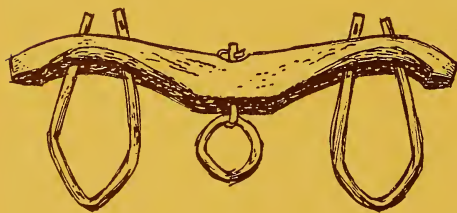
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Cameron, W. J.

Washington and Lincoln

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Dep

A TALK GIVEN ON THE
Ford Sunday Evening Hour

*Washington
and Lincoln*



By W. J. CAMERON

February 21, 1937



Number 23 of the 1936-37 Series broadcast
over the Nation-Wide Network of the
Columbia Broadcasting System from Detroit



FORD MOTOR COMPANY

Dearborn, Michigan

THE month of February brings round the birthdays of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Of all American statesmen these are the two whose personalities and public deeds are greatest in world renown and most revered by the people of foreign lands. They are the twin peaks of our national story.

Superficially, Washington has been reckoned with the aristocrats, while Lincoln is regarded as a son of the soil, but both were men of noble breed. When you see a great moral leader arise free of pettiness and personal ambition, you can always predicate that he springs from good stock—a thoroughbred comes from no other. Not that this is an exclusive term, for clean and simple and good stock exists everywhere and is constantly replenished, even though most of it is undistinguished publicly. Lincoln's family line took a long downward curve through lowly life for several generations, and emerged again in leadership, but its original strength and quality had not been lost.

Nevertheless, these two men in their carriage and careers were in sharp contrast. Washington ripened without the toughening experience of struggle; from the age of 19 he had command of men and the management of affairs; his powers were immediately equal to every task that Destiny laid on him. Lincoln attained his stature by continuous exertion and defeat and difficulty. For 52 years Destiny hammered him on the anvil of discipline in preparation for four brief years of public service, and at 56 he was dead. Washington was a stately man, urbane, of equal mood and temper; Lincoln was homespun, humorous and melancholy by turn, haunted by a sense of the mystical overtone in things. Washington was austere, and amongst all the men he knew had no familiar; Lincoln laughed and lived with

high and low alike—a homely man whom generals sometimes snubbed and cabinet members underestimated. In spite of his life of ceaseless action, Washington never moves us with a sense of drama. Lincoln, a man of little action, seems a dramatic and a tragic figure at every stage of his career. And then there is their contrast as to quotability; it would be difficult offhand for most of us to recall a word George Washington ever said or wrote, but the speeches and inaugurals and letters and sayings of Abraham Lincoln make him the most quotable of our public men, and his writings, in at least three instances, by sheer beauty and truth, have attained to immortality.

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Their contrasts, however, are superficial; their likeness to each other went deeper. Both were faced with a divided country, but both believed in the essential unity of the American mind and ideal. Their mission was to reunite, not further widen the rift of class and section. They believed in the importance of the American nation to the world, and considered no price too great to maintain that nation's integrity. Washington was the unifying force that drew 13 bickering Colonies into a Constitutional Union because he believed that this nation indivisible was the one hope for constitutional liberty in the world. But up to Lincoln's time full Union was not attained, and to understand that this was not an academic matter we need only visualize *this continent with no United States*—the Ohio River dividing two nations north and south, with perhaps the Mississippi bounding a third nation to the West—the United States that was-to-be severed and helpless. Well, that evil hap did not occur. The dream of George Washington, delayed for his day and generation, came true in 1865, and since that time, whatever else our

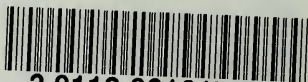
Country may be, it has been a true Union.

Another likeness existed between these men: they were competent, but not clever, men; they did not precipitate great issues; they wisely waited the event. Eight months before he took command of the Continental Army, Washington said that no one in North America was thinking of Independence, yet in eight months circumstances forced him to fight for Independence. Lincoln till almost near the end believed there could have been some other way than war to cement the Union. But on moral issues neither man ever suffered a moment's trepidation or doubt, never trifled with what he believed to be right. Neither talked of power or craved it; what power they had was thrust upon them and instantly relinquished when the need was past. The American people of Washington's and Lincoln's times retained a wholesome suspicion of public power and reduced it to the minimum necessary for maintaining peace and order in the land.

Thus, through duty done without the slightest taint of self-aggrandizement, both these men came to be the personalities by whom the world chiefly judges our nation. We may say of each of them what Lowell said of one:

“Here was a type of the true elder race,
And one of Plutarch's men talked with us face to
face.”

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